How To Choose a Guitar For Purchase

Choosing a guitar is an exciting but sometimes confusing undertaking because of all the variables that you might feel are involved. What brand, what wood, electric or acoustic, what style, size, string-type, color and then what about all the things you don't know about guitars, right? Let's simplify the process a bit.

Firstly, you probably have an idea whether you want an electric or acoustic guitar. Acoustic guitars are those guitars (typically with a sound hole) that are loud enough to be heard without amplification. Sure you can hear an electric when not plugged in, but it sounds pretty wimpy without an amp. To seemingly complicate the matter, we have acoustics that can be plugged in for amplification, making them electric and there are semi-hollow electric guitars, making them "acoustic" to a degree. The style of music and how you will be playing will often times be the determining factor as to what type of guitar you will want to get. Usually the heavier the music, the more an electric will suit you. There are not a lot of screamo bands playing acoustically these days and not a ton of bluegrass players shredding a Les Paul through a Marshall half-stack. With that being said, the rules have been broken so there is nothing holding you back from doing either of those or anywhere in between. Let's talk a bit about the differences between the two before going any further.

Acoustic guitars don't need an amp to hear them well, so they are nice and portable. The action (distance from string to fretboard) tends to be a little higher than electrics and the strings are typically thicker making bending and intricate licks/noodling more difficult. They sound great playing open chords and fingerpicking. On the other hand, electrics usually have lower action making soloing and subtle movements easier. I'm asked a lot about what beginners should start with. For different reasons I would choose both, but most of the time, I would say an acoustic would be my choice. There is less to be distracted by with an acoustic and you can play so many different styles easily on the acoustic. When directing a student to a new guitar purchase, the main variables for me always come down to: budget, feel and sound (in no particular order). Trying a bunch of guitars in your price range will give you a great education on feel and sound. I KNOW you want the pretty red guitar, but don't pick the guitar because it's red if it sounds or plays badly. The prettiness will get old. Bad sound or feel does not go away.

If you have a $300 budget, there is no need in seriously looking at the $1000 guitars, although knowing what they feel and sound like would be helpful to your education. I have some expensive guitars and some cheapos. Sometimes more money gets you more guitar and sometimes more money just makes you think you are getting a better guitar. I recently played two different classical (nylon string) guitars. One was $5000 and the other was $100. Can you guess which one sounded and played better? You would be surprised. For one, I was not in the mood to drop $5000 on a classical, so that price range was not a consideration. However, if I did not look at the prices or brands, the $100 guitar played and sounded as good as the $5000 model. Now this does not always happen, but it happens often. There are great cheap guitars and terrible expensive ones. Higher prices usually equates to better woods, craftmanship etc., but manufacturers are getting really good at producing good guitars at cheaper prices. DON'T let the price alone dictate a guitar purchase. You will be sorry. So, figure out what your budget is and try to stick to it. You can get an acceptable $150 acoustic or electric if you know what to look for. I have guitars priced from $100 to several thousand dollars, but none were purchased regarding price alone. Let me clarify; more expensive guitars TYPICALLY equate to better guitars, but be careful in using that to determine a guitars worth.

Feel is an important variable in choosing an instrument. In fact, there are so many other variables other than the guitar itself that dictate sound (strings, pick, technique, etc.), whereas feel is a harder thing to change on a guitar. For smaller folks and kids, there are 3/4 and 1/2 size guitars that might be easier to reach around. There are different full-sized acoustic bodies like jumbo, dreadnought and parlor as well. But you don't need to know the names. Use your common sense. If a guitar body is too big, try a smaller one. Electric bodies usually run much smaller than

acoustics. String action is also imporant as high action (string height) can make chording and fretting difficult and discouraging. The only way for you to know what is "normal", or "high" is to try a bunch of guitars. Try some expensive ones too, so you can get an idea for different price ranges and what the extra money may or may not buy you. Keep in mind that string action can usually be adjusted, if everything else works for you. Many electric guitars have adjustable bridges. Acoustic guitar bridges can be "shimmed" or trimmed to give optimal action. Most guitar necks are also adjustable. However, neither of these adjustments are ones that beginners will probably want to attempt. I prefer to have an expert adjust them, however with experience and trial/error you can get pretty good at this type of thing. Okay, so all that said, make sure the "feel" of the guitar is the best out of all the guitars that you try.

Sound is the other important variable. Different woods and their ages, string types, pick type etc., are some of the variables that dictate the sound of the guitar. Make sure that you are comparing apples to apples, such as comparing guitars with the same pick, playing the same songs, etc. Even playing in different rooms will make the guitar sound differently. If playing several electrics, make sure you are playing them all through the same amp with the same settings. A bad sounding guitar through a great amp will typically sound better than a great guitar through a bad amp, so USE THE SAME VARIABLES!!!

Buying a <u>first</u> guitar is best done at a store where you can get an education in the process. Don't be afraid to ask questions, try a bunch of guitars and get what you want. Be polite, but you are getting ready to spend some money, so don't be rushed or talked into something that does not resonate with you (feel, sound and budget). It's okay to consider other prices and find out about different woods, etc., but ultimately it's what YOU are most happy with, not the sales person. Take brand names with a grain of salt. There is not a best guitar, only what's best for you. There may be more suitable guitars for specific jobs, but keep an open mind. That is, don't buy a guitar just because of the name. I have brand name guitars that you would know and others that you would not, but I love them all for different reasons. BUDGET, FEEL AND SOUND...repeat the mantra after me...BUDGET, FEEL AND SOUND...BUDGET, FEEL AND SOUND. Now go fall in love with a guitar!!